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## Book Review

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Mayfair Yang (ed.), *Chinese Environmental Ethics: Religions, Ontologies, and Practices* (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), 270 pp., \$128 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-5381-5648-3.

This book anthologizes the contributions to January 2019 interdisciplinary conference at University of California Santa Barbara ‘explor[ing] how traditional Chinese religio-environmental ethics were actually put into social practice in China’s past and present’ (book’s back cover). The accusatory adverb ‘actually’ here indicates both positionality and claim: the accomplished cultural anthropologist of China and Chinese religions, Mayfair Yang, has engineered the edited volume to appear under the sign of ‘environmental anthropology’, even if individual contributors profess the disciplines of history, religious studies, sociology, etc.; and she and the other contributors to the volume challenge superficial presentations of ‘religio-environmental ethics’ (that is to say, romanticist ‘greenwashed’ rhetoric) that nation-states, official religious institutions, and non-governmental organizations can often promote to distract us from cognizing and remediating ongoing environmental catastrophe in and outside of China.

Yang’s editorial introduction first situates the pieces in the context of this catastrophe: the conference coincides with the fifty-year anniversary of the Santa Barbara oil spill in January 1969, and between the conference and the publication of the edited volume, the summer of 2020 saw great floods erupting in China and the emergence of the fatal COVID-19 virus from Wuhan. The Anthropocene—when human activity has changed the workings of the biosphere—describes how industrialization and economic growth have led to unprecedented fire, flood, drought, and death in China and the U.S. (p. 3-8). Three subsequent sections address the volume’s contributions in terms of ‘religions, ontologies, and practices’ respectively: it looks forward to an ‘anthropology of ethics’ that actually includes Chinese religions like Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, popular religion, and *fengshui* 風水; actually considers non-human entities like animals, deities, forests, and landscapes as real; and actually discusses how high-minded, counter-cultural Asian religious ecological texts and ideas are interpreted, implemented, and made to bear fruit in the flow of social life (p. 8-27). In this work, we can witness how romantic visions of natural process, harmonious mutuality, or nonviolent growth confront (and become imbricated within histories of) developmental progress and environmental exploitation.

Three of the eight essays illuminate facets of contemporary Chinese Buddhist environmentalism from Taipei, Shanghai, and New York City; two explore the potential

of *fengshui* in resisting land development within the Qing Dynastic bureaucratic apparatus and by the Henan provincial government in the 2010s; two examine how temples pursue forestry projects in Gansu and Shaanxi provinces; and the final essay explores the ontology of dreaming in early medieval texts. Each piece is exceedingly self-reflexive, careful to translate local Chinese understandings from the spheres of 'religion', 'culture', and 'nature' into academic English, rather than presumptively deploying Anglophone webs of meaning to capture Chinese realities.

Jeffrey Nicolaisen's opening essay, for instance, spends much ink provincializing the Western, Christian assumptions baked into mainstream notions of 'human equality' enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and unpacks the ontological connotations of Chinese words for 'environment' (*huanjing* 環境) and 'nature' (*ziran* 自然) in service of explicating the Taiwanese Buddhist activist-nun Shih Chao-hwei's (釋昭慧1957) 'equality of life' (*shengming pingdeng* 生命平等) ethic, which views human and nonhuman sentient beings as equal, and can ground animal welfare and conservationist projects. Similarly, Mayfair Yang and Huang Weishan's contribution juxtaposes Charles Taylor's theorization of 'secularity' alongside the efforts of a lay Buddhist volunteer cadre in Shanghai to embody an ethics of ethical eating (locavore and vegetarian) and heightened recycling in practice and propagation: these mostly women volunteers of the Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation 'straddl[e...] the religious-secular divide' (p. 96) by living their transcendental values within communal, neighborhood-based urban life. Finally, Wei Dedong carefully recounts how Chinese Buddhists in New York City transitioned from 'blind release of life' (*mangmu fangsheng* 盲目放生) to 'wise release of life' (*zhihui fangsheng* 智慧放生) in their animal release rituals, as the Buddhists of Grace Gratitude Buddhist Temple begin learning from local conservation societies how to 'release' birds and turtles into the wild in ways that ensure survival for the released animals and the health of their receiving habitats, but are still culturally recognizable to (and thus karmically efficacious for) the Buddhists involved. The three 'eco-Buddhism' chapters highlight the adaptability of Buddhist ethics and their enactors in processing novel socio-political realities.

The pair of *fengshui* chapters explore how the government and the people negotiate the development of human-inhabited terrain by invoking geomantic principles of siting architecture (graves particularly) in harmony with the natural flows of *qi* within a landscape. In Tristan G. Brown's chapter, Qing bureaucrats espoused anti-mining positions because preserving the sacrality of hillside landscapes would guarantee the 'peoples' livelihood' (*minsheng* 民生, their term) or, perhaps, a locale's 'sustainability' (our term); in Liang Yongjia's chapter, local Henanese concerns about geomancy rallied Neo-Confucian professors to successfully protest the government's proposal for large-scale removal of grave-sites toward industrial development. In the final pair of essays, Daoist and deity temples attempt to score political legitimacy by superintending forest growth and management: in Yang Der-Ruey's case, the forest governed by the Daoists of Minqin County in Gansu became desert when the river dried up and their rainmaking rituals devolved into mere

'superstition'; but the majestic forest of Adam Yuet Chau's Black Dragon King Temple of Shaanbei successfully mobilized 'intermeshing' regimes of 'tree-mindedness' ('traditional Chinese', 'socialist-mobilizational', and local 'temple based') to attract the investments of Beijing ecotourists. Finally, Robert Ford Campany's contribution, excerpted from a larger book project, recounts how extra-human actors (an elephant! a tree! an ant!) visit early medieval people in their dreams, and how these encounters impel them to act in the waking world.

This book directs the reader's gaze beyond Orientalist nostrums about traditional Chinese religions' ecological wisdom as well as Sinophobic depictions of Chinese culture as monomaniacally developmentalist and environmentally unappreciative. While one might expect a book titled *Chinese Environmental Ethics* to be highly textual, theoretical, and prescriptive, its contents are refreshingly empirical, considering how Chinese people take seriously their environments, their fellow sentient beings, and their sacred texts and injunctions. Environmental humanities scholars will not only receive a hearty introduction to environmentalism with Chinese religious characteristics, but can retain several useful case studies for witnessing Chinese religio-environmental ethics in action.

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